

OVERVIEW

The first two of the original “Ten Commandments” say there is one God only and to beware of idols. These commandments had a specific original meaning that is still with us. But Jesus reinterpreted all the commandments in ways and made them central to our lives. Just so, the original warning against idols was against false descriptions of God, often including images and statues as well as deplorable practices. Jesus extended the warning to substitutes for God that may not be called “gods” but lead to deplorable practices nevertheless.

KEY INSTRUCTION

Beware of naming inanimate objects or large groups with individual names or individual honor. Whether it is our automobile, our flag, or “the people”, it may lead us to place it before God and plunge us into deplorable practices.

COMMANDMENTS I and II – “Calves and Clouds”

It is 2017. Every year just when I get comfortable with writing 2016 on checks, it changes to 2017.

This says to me that I am a creature of habit. It’s easier to keep doing the same thing than changing to something new.

But there is a good side to habit. If the habit is good, it can keep us being good even when we’re diverted. If we make a habit of exercising in the morning, or avoiding fatty foods, or reading the Bible before bed, or going to church every Sunday, things like that, we can keep ourselves physically or spiritually healthy despite going through times of stress.

So I would like to make a habit of talking about how world-changing Jesus was. He changed our understanding of God, our access to eternal life, and our goals and plans for living – our everyday behaviors.

We are beginning a series on the 10 commandments, before and after our world changing Jesus.

In our memory verse, we said the first two commandments written in Exodus: put no other gods before Jehovah and make no idols. These are the originals.

In our second scripture reading from Matthew, Jesus was asked about the greatest commandments. He said the first was to love God in all possible ways, certainly similar to the first original commandment. Then he said the second was to love our neighbors as ourselves. These are wonderful. The only problem is that there was nothing about loving our neighbors as ourselves in the originals.

Where does loving neighbors come from, then? There is an instruction to love neighbors in Leviticus. It was our first scripture reading. It very clearly said that the neighbors we are to love are our own countrymen, our own ethnic and religious group. But when Jesus was asked who He meant by the neighbors we are to love he told the parable of the good Samaritan that changed the definition of neighbors into everybody in the world who we could help.

That was so Jesus. World-changer. Remember the original 10 commandments tell things we should not do. Jesus summarized them and put them in terms of what we should do, first toward God and then toward people. Positive and active rather than negative and passive. And he didn't just convert "Thou shalt nots" into "Thou shalt". He expanded and broadened and reinterpreted the meaning of each commandment. Like neighbor meaning not just countrymen but everybody we can help. I'd like to make this a habit. When you think of Jesus, think "world-changer." Savior, teacher, and world-changer.

Back to the original commandments. Jesus didn't say the originals were wrong or bad. He said he would not change a jot or tittle of them. Rather he would fulfill them. Some of what he meant was that he would show us how to understand them in a new way.

So let's go to the first two original commandments. What did Jesus teach us about them? What happened to the commandment about avoiding idols?

By the way, idols are very much still alive and well and dangerous.

First, what is an idol? We tend to think of statues or figurines because the Bible talks a lot about images that could be made or destroyed. Archaeologists are still digging them up. Consider a golden calf, a popular figurine from Egypt. Calves are seen in Egyptian hieroglyphics going back 2700 years BC. A golden calf stood for abundance, enough to eat. That's why the Israelites forced Aaron to make a golden calf while Moses was away up in Mount Sinai. They were hungry. The desert was barren. Praying for food doesn't sound that bad; why did God object so much?

The reason is that idols are more than one dimensional. The calf stood for more than just enough food; it stood for fertility as well as food and fighting strength to subjugate peoples and make slaves. God does not encourage fertility rites and does not promote attacking neighbors. Portraying God with a golden calf is like telling lies about God.

That's the problem with idols. As soon as one is invented, it is used to limit and twist God into a false form. Idols are always used to justify and encourage things that are the opposite of what God really wants. That's the outcome. Idols are used to control behavior. And the behaviors are never the narrow path that Jesus laid out to prepare us for heaven. That is why God condemns them.

Are there still idols today? Yes. They are objects and beliefs that justify ungodly actions.

When Adolph Hitler was coming to power, he argued that what he was doing was for the German Folk, the pure blooded German People. He was ignoring what Jesus taught about neighbors. He also wanted people to support his expulsion of immigrants, his genocide against Jews, and his attacks on his neighboring countries so he claimed all this was necessary to serve and lift up the German people. He wanted a physical image to focus people on his policies. So he made the swastika flag into an idol. It needed to be venerated and worshiped with the Heil Hitler salute. And it was designed to control the people's behavior, to get them to exterminate people Hitler defined as enemies.

I said that idols always lie about God. How about the swastika? Too many ways to count. Let me describe one way that is very relevant today. Around the world, nations are moving away from globalism, seeing all the people in the world as related, and moving toward nationalism, seeing each nation as having to fight for self-interest.

As this shift takes place, we need to beware of a specific lie about God. It has to do with how God comes to people. Nations are made up of individuals. This is how God sees nations. Each person needs to have a personal relationship with God. That is what Jesus said every time He was asked about the Jewish nation or the Jewish people. He changed the definition of neighbors from one nation into individuals everywhere. God does not save nations, at least not directly. A nation is not a single person. God saves individual people.

Let me talk about an idol in everyday lives. Here is a personal example. I tend to drive until the gas gage is well below a quarter of a tank. Our Subaru Forester has a thirteen gallon tank. When I fill it up and it takes over 12 gallons, I often say to Joyce, "She was a thirsty girl." We got the Forester when its predecessor, our Chevy Cavalier, gave up the ghost. The front grill on the Cavalier looked very much like the face of a video game character named Yoshi. When we talked about this car we talked about Yoshi.

What I am doing is putting personality into an inanimate object. However much we like them, automobiles are still machines. It's fun and very common but human names for objects is a red flag for making an idol. Calling something a person makes it something we want to protect. We would respond if a human neighbor were beset by thugs but inanimate objects don't deserve such protection.

We are living in a time when more and more people are purchasing and carrying firearms. I'm not addressing what God thinks of this trend. But, if someone were trashing my automobile, would saying, "They're smashing Yoshi." make me more likely to point a gun than saying, "They're smashing the car"? In other words, personifying my car may affect my behavior. Only God should affect my behavior.

So Jesus did not say the word, idol, when he said what was most important. But avoiding idols is part of loving and behaving toward our neighbors as if they were ourselves.

What are other examples of idols? They may be sports or family or security or possessions that run amok, that displace other things in our lives. We all have something like this. Let us commit to recognize them and put them in their place.

Idols justify and control behaviors. They replace unselfish behaviors with selfish behaviors. Everyday things become idols when they take hold of us and direct what we do away from what Jesus, our world-changer, taught.

Amen.